

## Chapter 1: A Knock at the Door.

This story begins, as so many often do, with a blank page. This particular page took central position on a writing desk in the heart of a cluttered office which, according to the sign on the door, belonged to a Mr Lachlan Duff, Private Investigator. It was fortunate that Mr Duff had troubled to label his office even though it was in his private home, because anybody who happened by would have been quite unable to recognise him had they glanced in: he was hunched over the piece of paper with his behind in the air, his sharp brown eyes examining every unremarkable inch of it. His housekeeper, Mrs Hilda O'Hare, would have recognised Mr Duff's behind regardless of how it was labelled, but she still found it to be entirely in poor taste to see it angled at her whenever she dared make use of the hallway.

The story *continues* with a knock at the door, which was both a blessed relief, because Hilda did not much care to look at Mr Duff's behind in the air for a moment longer, and somewhat unexpected, because they lived in a boat.

The low, narrow corridors of the old paddle-steamer forced Hilda to stoop as she moved briskly towards what amounted to the front door, and when she opened it she was only moderately surprised (given as she was to pessimism generally) to find that there was a policeman waiting outside. The young constable, a man of about twenty-five, was Roger Grimsby. Mrs O'Hare recognised him at once, and peered over his shoulder. She expected to see his superior or perhaps the Port of Manchester Police accompanying him, but he was alone. Grimsby was not the sort of fellow who easily commanded respect, for though he was tall and on the surface of it rather good

looking, he presented himself with such a calf-like expression on his face that it was obvious he was not a shrewd nor calculating person.

'Good morning, missus,' he said. He took his helmet off when he was greeted by Hilda's hard features, his mouth contorting momentarily into an odd 's' shape. Hilda was a tall woman, with thick steel-grey hair that looked like wire. She was of amazonian build, and her large hands were rough from a lifetime of good, hard work. Grimsby found it unnerving that she could meet his eye without so much as a tilt of her chin. Hilda had never been beautiful, but she more than made up for it with ferocity; Mr O'Hare, God rest his soul, had fallen in love with the hard intelligence and unyielding scrutiny that was presently making Constable Grimsby regret his reason for calling.

'Can I help you, Constable Grimsby?'

'Mr Duff has piece of paper that belongs to me,' Grimsby began, clearing his throat rather awkwardly, 'and I'm afraid I must have it back.'

'What paper?' That Hilda knew perfectly well what piece of paper Mr Grimsby referred to was neither here nor there -- she had berated Mr Duff for his interest in it when she'd gone to wake him and found his bed empty and unslept in, and again when she'd brought him his morning coffee. That he preferred to stare at it instead of working on real, *paying* cases seemed frankly absurd.

Grimsby removed a small notebook from his pocket, juggling his helmet until it was under one arm, and read stiltedly: 'It is a nine inch by twelve inch sheet of parchment, likely of mass production, which has no other distinguishing marks save for the bottom corner is dog-eared somewhat from having been in a briefcase. Have you seen it?'

Hilda stared at him, her only response a slight flare in her nostrils. The movement drew his gaze, and then he balked and quickly adjusted it for the fear that she might reprimand him. His Adam's apple bobbed noticeably at the collar of his uniform, and he clung to his policeman's helmet as though it were a life-ring and he was lost at sea.

'It's only,' Grimsby went on ill-advisedly, 'I gave Mr Duff a borrow of it, and I need it back.'

'And what if he's used it?' Hilda asked, 'would you accept like for like, Mr Grimsby, or can we expect to be in your debt forever more?'

'Used it!' Grimsby flushed red at the prospect. He opened his mouth to reply but struggled to find the words, and instead succeeded only in gulping air. Then, they were interrupted.

'I say, it's Constable Grimsby!' Mr Duff announced himself from the dim hallway. 'What the devil are you doing here?'

When he was the right way up Lachlan Duff was a stocky, broad-shouldered little man with a thick, dark brown moustache that consumed the entirety of his upper lip. He was forty-six years old, but though his face was weathered he had a brightness in his eyes that gave him a certain vigour that both Mrs O'Hare and Constable Grimsby lacked. He was a head shorter than either of them, and yet when he appeared he seemed to fill the space entirely.

'Constable Grimsby has come for his bit of paper,' Hilda said. Though properness dictated that she ought to fade into the background now that her master was present, she was thoroughly entrenched in the doorway and made absolutely no move to observe the custom. This egregious oversight went unremarked upon by either of the two men present, who knew better than to start

throwing stones when they lived in glass houses.

'Already? But I've scarcely begun,' said Mr Duff.

'There's been another,' Grimsby replied, and averted his gaze towards his feet. 'They'll miss it, Mr Duff.'

'Another!' Mr Duff's bright eyes were suddenly a gleam with something almost like triumph, though Grimsby shared none of his apparent glee. 'Where! When? *Who*? I must have it all, Constable.'

'On a train, sir. The 8:15 to Cornwall out of Oxford Road,' Grimsby said compliantly, though his face contorted as though it was an unwilling admission. 'A priest.'

'Scarcely an hour ago!' Mr Duff's small body was taut with excitement, his hands raised as if he had some purpose for them that he was impatient to turn to. If Mr Grimsby had any reservations about discussing the circumstances of his call in front of Mrs O'Hare, Mr Duff was pleasantly unaffected by them.

'Mr Duff!' Hilda glared down at him. 'Have a little respect.'

'Yes, of course. How tragic. Did he know Cunningham? Was he found the same as the others?'

'I haven't been to the scene, sir,' Grimsby said, and then hopefully added: 'if I might have the piece of paper, I'll be going there directly.'

'I shall come along with you!' Before constable or housekeeper could protest, Mr Duff had disappeared into the corridor to fetch his boots and coat. The high scarlet colour in Grimsby's face drained. His only chance had been to retrieve the piece of paper -- loaned to Mr Duff directly from the evidence locker -- and put it back before his superiors found it missing. He hadn't expected the

older man to poach it from him entirely! His protest died on his lips; Mr Duff was gone before the words had even formed.

He reappeared moments later with his coat on and his hat in hand, and Grimsby couldn't help but notice the distinct lack of any sign of his much-discussed piece of paper. There was a moment of thick silence between them, as the constable tried to find both the strength and the verbal dexterity to suggest that this was a dreadful idea and to insist on the return of his evidence, and Mr Duff made direct, knowing eye-contact so that he wouldn't.

'Shall we be off?'

And so they were.